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ABSTRACT

In a survey of the status of theatre in high schools throughout the United States, questionnaires were sent to a random sample of high schools stratified by state and by school size. Analysis of the responses obtained from 606 schools (20.2% return) indicated that most secondary-school drama programs operate on the cocurricular level and emphasize production. This report gives data obtained about such aspects of the programs as training of instructors, program goals, frequency of productions, degree of student involvement in productions, financial and other types of support, and major problems cited by drama teacher/coaches. The report notes implications of the study and suggests some ways of alleviating problems and improving the quality of high school theatre programs. (GW)

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A SURVEY OF THEATRE IN AMERICAN SECONDARY SCHOOLS

Patti Gillespie, Andrew Wolvin, Susan Romans

This study details a survey of the status of theatre in a stratified sample of American high schools. The results indicate that most secondary school drama programs operate on the co-curricular level with an emphasis on production. While the drama teacher typically is trained in theatre, the poor working conditions and lack of financial support for the programs are major deterrents.

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The high school theatre experience builds on exposure to dramatic art which is enjoyed by too few American young people in pre-secondary school years. It certainly has some effect on the attitudes our young people carry into their high schools and post-high school lives, be that as college students or as citizens in the working world. If one reflects on that view, it must follow that interest in, and concern for, the status of high school theatre must be of concern to all who touch theatre directly or vicariously.[1]

This rationale, described in the comprehensive survey of secondary school theatre programs conducted in 1970, continues to support the need for research on the status of theatre activities in American high schools. Also in 1970, Charlotte K. Motter, reflecting on the status of high school theatre, concluded:

> The current educational trends inspire much hope that administrators will soon design curricula in the fine arts and seek experts to teach the courses. . .Until that day arrives, the status of drama in the high school will continue to depend upon the talent, philosophy, and tenacity of the individual teacher-director.[2]

Does this conclusion reflect the status of theatre in American high schools in 1976? In an effort to determine what are current principles and practices in secondary school theatre programs, this survey was designed to analyze a nation-wide sample of secondary schools.[3]

PROCEDURES

In April 1975, three thousand questionnaires were mailed to high school drama teachers. The number of questionnaires sent to each of fifty states was determined by the secondary school population of that state. Within each state, the drama teachers receiving questionnaires were selected from a random sample stratified by state and by size of school. Although only 606 (20.2%) of the questionnaires were returned,[4] representation was obtained from schools of various sizes:

TABLE 1
Responses

School Enrollment	Percentage of Respondents
Under 1000	35.0%
1000-1500	23.2%
1500-2000	19.3%
Over 2000	22.5%

FINDINGS

Dramatic activity in these schools was overwhelmingly described as co-curricular (61.0%) or extra-curricular (29.3%). The activities occasionally engaged fewer than twenty (14.6%) or more than one-hundred students (18.8%), but most programs served between twenty and one hundred students, with fifty being the average number of students involved. The time devoted by students differed markedly. Drama teachers defined low involvement as a commitment of one or two hours each week, moderate involvement five or six hours, and high involvement over fifteen hours each week. Despite rather substantial expenditures of time, few students (31.8%) receive any academic credit for the work. The drama teacher/coach (and usually there is only one) likely receives a stipend (74.9%), but is seldom given release time (6.4%). The time spent by coaches varies tremendously:

TABLE 11
Time Spent by Drama Coaches

Hours Expended	Percentage of Respondents
1-10	43.4%
11-20	36.4%
21-30	12.4%
over 30	7.8%

Most of these hours are spent after school, in the evenings, and on weekends rather than during the school day.

The drama teacher/coaches are relatively new at their jobs: over three-fourths of them have been coaching less than ten years, with most (21.4%) being in their second or third year. Over half possess undergraduate degrees in theatre (19.1%), speech (16.7%),or speech/theatre (25.5%). Almost half of the teachers have studied beyond the B.A. and of these, 4018% have graduate hours in theatre. Of those holding master degrees, most are in theatre (33.7%), but English (22.0%) remains a strong field. Approximately 2% of those with advanced degrees have completed the doctorate, generally not in theatre. While this profile suggests many well-trained theatre teachers, 7.3% of the coaches have no experience whatever in drama.[5] Most do not affiliate with any professional associations. Interestingly, the American Theatre Association enrolls fewer than 6%; SCA enrolled none of the respondents.

The drama programs emphasize primarily social and personal, rather than professional, growth. Goals stressing self-actualization (57.8%) and group effort (53.5%) rank considerably above those advocating development of various theatrical skills (5.1%). This may account for the tendency to offer few or no courses in drama. Information about offerings is summarized briefly in Table 111:

TABLE 111
Theatre Course Offerings

COURSES	0	1	2	3	4	5 and over
semster length	45.6	16.1	16.6	5.3	5.8	10.6
year length	62.3	12.8		10.8	6.7	3.6

When courses are offered, they are most apt to include units in acting (96.2%), creative dramatics (72.8%), and theatre history (72.8%): they are least likely to include units in promotion (29.6%), play writing

(26.4%), and house management (25%). Units in technical theatre (scenery, lighting, costuming, etc.) are offered in more than half but less than three-fourths of the courses.

In contrast to the limited formal instruction received, students seem to be involved in a flurry of activities. Most programs each year offer an average of one or two one-act plays, a full-longth play, a full-length musical. Most programs produce modern plays, serious, comic, or musical. Of the few who turn to the classical repertory, most seek comedies and almost none use historical dramas. They take one or two field trips to other productions and organize one social activity. Almost none attend or conduct workshops (.24%) or master classes (.151%). In addition to their work in the high school program, several students (mean 9.637, mode 0) apparently participate actively in dramatic activities sponsored by community organizations of one sort or another. The junior/senior play is no longer a major factor (23.2%),[6] but original variety shows, assembly skits, and the like continue strong (59.5%). Of those who attend competitive festivals each year (46 % do not), slightly more than half believe their participation is more important than their winning. About half who participate believe the evaluations given them at these festivals (judged mostly by college drama teachers) have been educationally valuable to their students. Few schools participate in non-competitive festivals.

The value of student involvement in the high school productions is among the most revealing information gained from the survey. In planning play productions, the drama teacher/coach tends to work alone. Students are involved in planning less than 25% of the time; students do the planning less than 6% of the time. In the technical and business areas, the coach usually works alone. Students help about 25% of the time, but work independently less than 10% of the time.

Data about student designers (both scenic and costume) are confused; many persons responding to the questionnaire apparently make no distinction between "designing" and "constructing" scenery, costumes, properties. This pattern repeats for activities other than productions as well. Table IV summarizes the activities of students in a typical year:

TABLE IV
Student Activity

Activity	Mean	Mode
Attending	500.39	500
Acting	39.67	30
Working/Tech Crew	19.87	30
Working Business Crew	8.31	10
HEADING Tech Crew	4.84	2
Asst. Director	2.47	2
Head Business Crew	2.33	2
Directing	2.01	0
Writing	.2	0

Few of those heading technical or business crews had significant prior experience in that capacity. About 10% had served as crew chief four times previously; less than half had been a crew chief even twice before. Similarly, leading actors lacked experience. About 20% had performed leading roles as many as four times prior to the current production; about half had acted leading roles twice before.

Financial support for most drama programs hovers somewhere between $500.00 (mode) and $1000.00 (mean $1,199.50). The money comes primarily from ticket sales: in almost half of the schools reporting, such sales account for between 90% and 100% of the program's funding. In descending order of importance, other funds are secured from the school board or system, the students participating in the program, the contributions of the faculty member(s), the sale of program advertising, and student organizations. Of the funds available, most are spent in the production of other plays (Mean is 89.59%, mode is 99%). Attendance at play festivals (.3%), social

activities (.248%), and field trips (.196%) constitute the bulk of the remaining disbursements. Knowing that most money goes to play production, the budgets of productions are especially interesting. In order of descending average expenditure, a typical production budget resembles Table V:

TABLE V
Typical Production Budget

Item	Mean	Mode
set	$149.63	$100.00
scripts and royalties	100.71	100.00
costumes	49.93	0
make up	20.04	10.00
properties	14.88	0
programs	10.50	0
promotion	19.72	0
equipment breakage and replacement	5.04	0

Obviously, with a typical production budget of about $300, each program depends heavily on various sorts of non-monetary support. Free technical help in the form of loaned power equipment, hand tools, paint, and building materials is the most often reported. Free, or greatly reduced rates for, promotional and public relations ventures was the next most cited form of non-monetary support. Loaned or donated properties, costumes, and make-up were other common sources. In descending order of frequency, transportation, space, maintenance/janitorial service, and simply "outside help" were occasionally reported.

Perhaps in view of the financial situation just described, it is understandable that over half of the coaches cite lack of money and lack of administrative/collegial support as two of their three most pressing problems. The major kinds of problems, however, are those relating directly to production: too many groups trying to use the stage; too many conflicts in the schedules of students wishing to participate in drama: poor technical support; unbalanced acting pool: and insufficient numbers of

available plays appropriate for high school productions. Closely behind these three major problems were others relating to the inadequacy of physical plant, the insufficiency of time, and the relatively poor preparation of the students and/or the teacher/coach, particularly in the technical areas.

IMPLICATIONS

The high percentage of returns from schools enrolling over 1000 students probably biases our results in favor of more active and "better" programs.[7] However, even in this context, some conclusions seem possible and some questions pertinent.

First, the professional preparation of high school drama teacher/coaches may have improved. Typically he or she has been trained in theatre and/or speech. English teachers teaching in the field of secondary school theatre can no longer bear the major blame for whatever inadequacies exist in high school programs since only 29.7% of the responding drama teachers now hold undergraduate degrees in English, and the relative percentage declines with the more graduate work the drama teacher/coach reports. The youth of the current teachers suggests that many will remain in their positions for some time.

Second, the working conditions of drama teacher/coachers are not attractive. In addition to a full teaching load, they spend an average of 10-13 hours each week, most often at night or over the weekend, coaching and/or advising some fifty students (most of whom have little experience) in the production of several plays, field trips, and social events.

Third, most high school drama programs are co-curricular and are heavily production-centered. Relatively few formal courses are offered; relatively rew workshops or master classes are included; but productions are relatively reequent. Although the demands of production are the most often cited problems, the drama teacher/coach seldom substitutes less

complicated projects (scenes in English classes, readers theatre, play readings) for full productions; rather, such projects are undertaken along with full productions. If the goals of the drama program are in fact humane rather than professional, the wisdom of reducing the number of full-scale productions in favor of laboratory experiences might be explored by teachers.

Fourth, although overwhelming agreement exists that the goals of high school programs are humane rather than professional, some tension exists between goals and proactices. While students' sense of responsibility is the number one goal reported for most programs, the typical coach tends to work alone. Students are rarely given primary reponsibility for planning productions and activities. Professional goals (excellence of production, development of professional skills) ranks low, a fact which may account for the coaches' perceived problems relating to the restricted abilities of students as actors, technicians, etc. There may be a dilemma here, one as yet unrecognized, or at least unresolved, by the drama teacher/coaches: to assume responsibility, the student may have to acquire skills. Stated another way, in order to achieve the primary goal of the program (student development), increased concern for professional goals may be a necessary prior condition.

Fifth, lack of money is the second most pressing problem perceived by high school drama teacher/coaches. That most programs must be self-supporting through ticket sales may account for the very high proportion of modern plays produced. Interestingly, however, average monies expended for scripts and royalties exceeds all other average expenditures except settings--and almost equals the total of all remaining expenditure categories.[8] Perhaps a bibliography of good, popular, low- or no-royalty plays would be beneficial to the high schools. Moreover, so long as production remains the

central activity and ticket sales the primary source of funds, little systematic upgrading of facilities or equipment is likely. Improvement seems to require either increased financial support from some outside group (the board, the senior class) or a decision to expend a production's receipts on a piece of equipment rather than on another full-scale production (creating a temporary cash-flow problem, no doubt).

Sixth, professional involvement of the high school drama teacher/coach is very low. Although relatively young and well-trained, the typical drama teacher does not belong to SCA or ATA. He or she may be active in state or local organizations, but, more likely, the drama program will be affiliated with one for secondary school students--National Thespian Society or National Forensic League.

Seventh, it would appear that college and university drama education programs must continue to emphasize the "realities" of poor budgets, inexperienced students, and extensive work of secondary school drama programs in the preparation of future theatre teachers. Interaction of college and university students and professors with their colleagues in the secondary schools should enable both teachers and students to benefit from the experiences in high school theatre.

As administrators, we should explore avenues to provide a more realistic base for such interaction. Since time is at such a premium in the high school teacher's schedule, and the final student teaching semester is so late in the drama education student's course of study, it has been difficult to implement the idea of greater interaction in most states. Perhaps greater college/university and school system commitment to in-service programs for drama teachers could provide a basis for bringing together the secondary school teachers and the drama education students and professors.

In 1968, Beck, Buys, Fleschhacker, Grandstaff and Sill published a stinging indictment of secondary school theatre:

> Thousands of high schools across the United States each year engage in dramatic activity of some kind. Typically this activity takes the form of a three-act play, and the quality of these performances ranges from superb to atrocious. Although the reasons for this discrepancy in quality are many, the faults can be summed up in a general indictment: Whenever a play is less than good, it is because the high school play director and his students know too little about the art and skills of play production.[9]

It is possible that eight years later we have progressed beyond that reputation of high school theatre and are beginning to see, despite some overwhelming obstacles, the growth and development of quality theatre programs at the co-curricular level.

NOTES

[1] John L. Peluso, "A Survey of the Status of Theatre in United States High Schools, "Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare, Office of Education, Bureau of Research, 1970, p. 3.

[2] Charlotte K. Motter, Theatre in High School (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1970), p. 18.

[3] The authors wish to acknowledge the assistance of the Instructional Development Division and the Theatre Division of theSpeech Communication Association with support for this project. Also, we appreciate the assistance of the Data Processing Center of George Mason University, Fairfax, Virginia.

[4] U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, Office of Education. Directory: Public Elementary and Secondary Day Schools 1968-69, 4 vols. Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1970. These are the most recent government figures available.

[5] While Peluso had a return of 48.19% of his questionnaires, we recognize that the length of our questionnaire and the lack of follow-up requests inhibited our returns. It should be noted that a similar response (28%) from secondary school forensic teachers was received in a companion study: Betty Anderson and Irene Matlon, "A Description of High School Forensic Programs," Journal of the American Forensic Association, X (Winter, 1974), pp. 121-126.

While such a low response can limit the generalizability of results, the report of what is available can serve as a "starting point" for understanding the nature of speech and theatre activities at the high school level.

[6] This finding represents a rather significant departure from data analyzed in 1970. John L. Peluso, A Survey of the Status of Theatre in United States High Schools: U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, Office of Education, Bureau of Research, 1970), pp. 19-20.

[7] Again, a departure from Peluso. See pp. 19: 33. If the improvement is real, theatre may be upgrading in the same way that forensics seems to be. See Betty Anderson and Irene Matlon, "A Description of High School Forensic Programs Report on a National Survey," Journal of the American Forensic Association, X, 3 (Winter, 1973), 125-126.

[8] Down from 1970. See Peluso, pp. 22; 35.

[9] See Peluso, p. 40. "The size of the student body was, in fact, identified as by far the most decisive factor in theatre program strength."

[10] Peluso' survey asked for a ranking of services high school drama teachers wished. They ranked "Play lists and evaluation of new plays for high schools" as number two. See p. 27.